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SUBJECT: AL-GHAD PARTY PUBLIC MELTDOWN CONTINUES: EGYPTIAN MEDIA THEMES, SEPTEMBER 19 TO 25

REF: CAIRO 7104

1. Summary: Public infighting among members of opposition Al-Ghad Party continued, with two members engaged in a shouting match on a popular satellite TV program on September 20. The same day, Al-Ghad Party leader Ayman Nour appeared on another TV program to accuse the government of trying to "destroy" the party and threaten the government with "retaliation." Commentators continued to discuss the fate of Minister of Culture Farouq Hosni (reftel) and President Mubarak's refusal to accept his resignation. A number of Egyptian commentators returned to the topic of U.S. policy in Iraq, with all condemning it. A columnist in the country's leading economic daily wrote on September 21 that U.S. involvement in Iraq was "a cover for a plan to colonize the region." Commentators had little to say about Israel's withdrawal from Gaza and the ensuing confusion at the Rafah border crossing, though comments by A/S Welch to the House International Relations Committee were widely reported on in the pro-government media. End summary.

Al-Ghad Party infighting continues in public

2. The public infighting at Opposition Al-Ghad Party continued (reftel). Orbit TV's Al-Safwa channel broadcast a live interview with Ayman Nour on September 20, during which he threatened the Egyptian government with unspecified "retaliation" for trying to "destroy" his party before November's parliamentary elections. "I prefer resorting to calm, but when some reckless people inside the regime play games, I say to them: We will retaliate," Nour stated. "We will not retaliate against their puppets, but against those for whom they work -- and they will suffer from what we will do to them." Two Al-Ghad party members appeared on satellite channel Dream TV's popular program "10 p.m.," also on September 20, to discuss the party's recent infighting. The two guests shouted insults at each other repeatedly during the interview, accusing each other of trying to ruin the party. (Note: After the two guests were finished, "10 p.m." announced the program was terminated "due to technical problems." End note.) On September 23 ardently pro-government Al-Gomhouriya (circulation: 200,000) reported that Nour's supporters attacked the "reformist elements" within the party, with several injuries resulting from the scuffle. All major newspapers' crime pages reported that an investigation of the (physical) infighting was underway. On September 24, pro-government weekly Akhbar Al-Youm (circulation: 1,000,000) columnist and former board chairman, Ibrahim Saada, criticized the Egyptian media for highlighting "the conflicts inside political parties" and urged the NDP to "stop these reports, because they refute what we say about political movement in Egypt toward pluralism, and destroy Egypt's reputation."

Minister of Culture's resignation refused; "We are all responsible"

3. Commentaries criticizing the Minister of Culture Farouq Hosni continued in the media (reftel), as did conspiracy theories about why he resigned among PA contacts -- e.g., to protect another Ministry official or simply to give the public the appearance of responsibility when the Minister knew all along that Mubarak would not accept his resignation. However, some commentators saw something more in the Minister's resignation than conspiracy theories. The editor-in-chief of opposition daily Al-Wafd (circulation: 50,000), Abbas Al-Tarabily, wrote on September 20, "Although the minister was morally responsible, we are all responsible with him. We preoccupy ourselves with the big issues and neglect minor details, such as fire extinguishers." A commentator in pro-government daily Al-Akhbar (circulation: 800,000) on September 21 -- referring to writer Naguib Mahfouz's public comment that Minister Farouq Hosni's resignation recalled the "good old days of democracy in Egypt" -- encouraged a "managerial revolution in all ministries and government agencies" in which "officials acknowledged responsibility

for their shortcomings." Dream TV's "10 P.M." hosted family members of the Beni Suef fire victims on September 19, during which the family members criticized a local hospital and government security forces for their "grave carelessness" which led to the deaths of or additional harm to the injured.

Iraq violence blamed on America (again)

14. With presidential elections over and the Gaza withdrawal completed, commentators and news reports began to focus again on Iraq and to blame the U.S. for the country's violence. On September 23, an unsigned editorial in Al-Gomhouriya characterized U.S. policy in Iraq as "a failure even before the invasion -- and it continues to be a failure." A September 24 unsigned editorial in leading pro-government daily Al-Ahram (circulation: 750,000) claimed the situation in Iraq was "completely dangerous" and demanded that the U.S. set "a timetable for the occupation's withdrawal." Both editorials predicted a civil war in Iraq. The country's leading economic daily, the independent Al-Alam Al-Youm (circulation: 25,000), also published several commentaries critical of U.S. policy in Iraq, with one commentator opining on September 21, "The American adventure in Iraq has failed because it was a cover for a plan to colonize the region."

Gaza withdrawal Praise for Egypt

15. On September 22, all government-controlled newspapers' front pages and TV newscasts reported on A/S Welch and General Ward's testimonies before the House International Relations Committee on September 21. Al-Ahram's September 22 banner headline read "Washington: Egypt's Role Vital in Successful Israeli Withdrawal from Gaza," with the ensuing article quoting General Ward as thanking Egypt for helping to assist Palestinian security forces. The same article also quoted A/S Welch as saying that Israeli settlement expansion in the West Bank "must stop." Commentary on the withdrawal and ensuing confusion at the Rafah border crossing was largely absent in the Egyptian media, with many commentators instead condemning Israeli PM Sharon's address to the UN (reftel). One columnist in Al-Akhbar on September 20 wrote that Israel's withdrawal "has turned Gaza into an enormous prison for Palestinians." The columnist continued, "This is how the Arab and Muslim world is accustomed to doing things -- making big concessions for practically nothing in return."

JONES